

THEATRICAL AMUSEMENTS

AND

12

HORSE-RACING.



TO BE HAD AT FRIENDS' BOOK STORE,
No. 304 ARCH STREET, PHILADELPHIA.

1877.



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2018 with funding from

This project is made possible by a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services as administered by the Pennsylvania Department of Education through the Office of Commonwealth Libraries.

ADDRESS

*Of the Representatives of the Religious Society of Friends in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware, on Theatrical Amusements and Horse-Racing.—
Issued Twelfth month, 19th, 1873.*

UNDER an affecting sense of the responsibility attached to the members of a community that professes to be believers in the self-denying religion of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world, and impressed with the grievous departures from the sobriety and pure morality which that religion enjoins, we feel ourselves called on, as those who must give account, to address our fellow-citizens, and invoke their attention to the sad evidences of iniquity that abound in our midst, and to call them to a serious consideration of its consequences.

It is a declaration of Holy Scripture, that “righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people,”—Prov. xiv. chap. 34 v., and we feel that whatever tends to lower the Gospel standard of virtue, is detrimental to the best interests of the community. In this connection we have been led to consider the influence exerted by two of the most popular modes of public amusement—theatrical exhibitions and horse-racing.

While arguments have been advanced in behalf of the drama as a means of instruction as well as enter-

tainment, we are painfully impressed with the belief that, whatever may be its supposed capabilities in this direction, the practical effect of theatrical exhibitions is in no wise to improve the morals, or elevate the taste of those who witness them. It is only needful to observe the character and tenor of many of the more popular plays, in order to be convinced that at best they give false views of life, and that, if they do not commend, they at least palliate various forms of vice and immorality. Are manliness and courage to be illustrated? how often is the hero but a daring highwayman or a notorious outlaw. Are more tender impulses to be depicted? how frequently is the libertine or the woman of loose morals personated upon the stage—not for reprobation, nor yet simply to add a higher coloring to the wild romance which is so fascinating—but because they pander, however covertly, to some of the grossest propensities of our nature. Should a serious character be occasionally introduced, is there not contempt at once thrown upon serious things, which often too successfully fixes the impression that religion at best is mere pretence, and that religious people as a rule are but hypocrites.

In evidence of the correctness of these impressions, the reports and comments of many of our daily prints give ample testimony; while we need but mark the placards at our street corners, with which all are familiar, in order to be satisfied as to the character of the entertainment to which in glowing colors they invite the public. That the spectacles thus advertised find a ready response among a class whose lives are

given up to dissipation in its worst forms, we need but to state that there are probably few theatres to which abandoned women do not freely resort, and that many of the actors themselves are believed to be of licentious habits.

To introduce young persons of innocent life and fair reputation to such associations as these, cannot but be very injurious. Yet how often have we to witness with sorrow the crowds of mere boys and girls who throng the doors of the play-house by night and by day, eager for admittance. Can they return from such a school without receiving some lesson which may prove their first step to ruin, or confirming tastes and habits that have already become vitiated?

The testimony of many a convict has been, that theatre-going made him first familiar with the doings of the thief or the murderer, and their shifts in evading justice. That the taste for such a life once contracted, he found his way readily to the drinking-saloon with all its evil associations; and that thence his downward course was rapid and ruinous.

A number of writers, widely known for their abilities and varied knowledge, have given their emphatic testimony that the general tone of dramatic literature is demoralizing; that there is a strong tendency in the exhibitions on the stage to deaden the moral sensibilities; to create a disrelish for the solemn truths of religion; to minister to the low appetites of the depraved, and to betray the innocent into the paths of vice and misery.

In close connection with the evils attendant upon the

theatre, opera and circus, are those growing out of the practice of horse-racing. So manifest have these been, that more than one legislative enactment has been passed with a view to its prevention. But by boldly evading the spirit of the law, and upon various pretexts, it is to be feared that this sport, if such it may be called, is again growing into favor. In its true character, it may be fairly designated as gambling on a large scale ; the shuffling of cards and the throwing of dice being exchanged for the uncertain and painful efforts of poor dumb animals, urged to their highest speed by whip and spur. Cruel and debasing in itself, its usual attendants are intemperance and profanity. As in the theatre so on the race-course, the moral atmosphere is tainted ; and under the contagious excitement, the comparatively innocent, lured on by gamblers and other profligate characters, often risk stake after stake until involved in harrassing debt, and betrayed, it may be, into other violations of morality, they finally cover themselves with disgrace and ruin. To gratify the taste for this cruel pastime, agricultural societies have, of late, introduced trotting at their exhibitions, ostensibly for the purpose of improving the breed of horses ; but even under their supervision, the temptation to wagering is too strong for prevention, and it may well be feared that, instead of promoting the original design of such fairs, they have thus become means of demoralizing a portion of our rural population.

In the early days of this Commonwealth, theatres and similar places of dissipation as well as horse-racing, were prohibited by law ; but in process of time, at the

solicitation of men of corrupt minds, and to secure an increase of revenue, the Legislature was induced to grant the issuing of licenses for such exhibitions. As the natural consequence, a marked laxity in public morals followed this unwise measure. But it is declared in the Scriptures of Truth, "When the judgments of the Lord are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness;" and during the awful scourge of our city by yellow fever in 1793, the people appeared to be greatly humbled under a sense of the necessity for reformation. Availing themselves of this favorable condition, a number of the leading ministers of various religious persuasions put forth and signed a memorial to the Legislature, asking for the passage of a law against vice and immorality, in which they represented, that in their apprehension, it was "peculiarly necessary to make some effectual provision * * * for regulating and lessening the number of houses where intoxicating liquors are sold and used; for the suppression of all places of gaming and lewd resort, and for the enacting of a law to *prevent theatrical exhibitions of every sort.*" To this memorial they appended "Some Considerations" to show the deleterious influence of theatrical exhibitions, in evidence of the necessity for their prohibition.

It is of the utmost importance to the well being of civil society, that the minds of the young be imbued with the principles of piety and virtue; with the habit of listening to and obeying the secret intimations of Divine Grace to their souls, and with a reverend regard for the sacred truths recorded in the Holy Scriptures, in order that they may enter upon the duties of life, pre-

pared to resist the temptations to evil, and to act their part as becomes Christian men and women. Upon them and the course they take, must greatly depend the future weal or woe of our beloved country. How deplorable a calamity is it then, that such schools of licentiousness and folly as theatres, operas, race-courses, &c., are thrown open to them on all sides; that they are sanctioned and encouraged by not a few who claim to be reputable, and even by Christian professors; that they are countenanced and applauded by a large proportion of the public press, and stimulated to make use of every means in their power, by the brilliance of scenery, the charms of music, the address of performers, and the splendor of their whole establishments, to entice the young of both sexes within their contaminating precincts.

While, however, thus deploring the demoralizing effects of exhibitions which, under the plea of needful recreation, find place with many, we rejoice in the persuasion that there is a large and, we trust, increasing number among our fellow-citizens, who need but to have their attention seriously turned towards the evils under consideration, in order to be convinced of their true character; and that by fostering them in our midst, the commendable efforts of devoted men and women, who are seeking to raise the general tone of society, by diffusing higher views of life and duty, are of necessity thwarted, or largely counteracted.

As a nation we have been singularly blessed and prospered, and it is to the benign influences of the Christian religion, in so far as they have been allowed to exert themselves, that much of this prosperity is to be justly

attributed. Yet we would earnestly press the consideration, that it is not a mere profession of the name of Christ that will promote His cause or the highest interest of mankind, but a conformity of the lives of men to His teachings. It is as His blessed government comes to be set up in their hearts, that they will be led to recognize the wide difference that ever has existed and ever must, between His kingdom and that of the god of this world; and that the Christian is clearly called to exemplify this important truth in his own daily walk.

For those who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity, and long with us to see His kingdom and truth exalted in the earth, we tenderly desire that they, as well as ourselves, may be brought fully to appreciate the responsibility of giving even a silent or negative approval to any form of popular diversion whereby that high standard which the religion of the New Testament has undoubtedly set up, shall appear to be in anywise lowered. We fear, that as professed Christians, too many of us are coming short of our duties; first—to the Lord, in not keeping our own souls pure, humble and faithful to Him, and secondly, in too easily persuading ourselves that we are free from responsibility for the actions of others. The true disciple rejoices to feel that, in the Divine sight, the souls of his fellow-beings are precious as his own, and that the mercy of God in Christ Jesus reaches to all. Instead of being engrossed in his own gains and pleasures, his heart will go forth in good-will to the whole family of man. He dare not ask the question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” but a sense of duty will prompt him, under Divine direction, to raise the

fallen, to gather the outcast, to shield the innocent and the unwary from temptation. Especially will he daily seek to live so near the blessed Master, that others may be thereby drawn to taste for themselves how good the Lord is, while he jealously watches lest any act of his shall put a "stumbling block or an occasion to fall in a brother's way." Sharing as every true follower of Christ must do, in efforts and desires such as these, we feel that, however else we may differ, we herein stand upon common ground; and that we need each others hearty support in endeavoring, by every right means, to stem a current which, it may well be feared, is steadily growing stronger, and is stealthily undermining what is pure and virtuous in the community.

